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The Place of Peer Interaction in Teacher Development

Findings from a Case Study

Nancy Van Note Chism

Presented at the Annual Meeting of the
American Educational Research Association
Chicago April, 1985

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The Place of Peer Interaction in Teacher Development:

Findings from a Case Study

ABSTRACT

This paper reports on work done as a part of a broader case study on conditions influencing staff development in an elementary school setting. It found that although teachers universally emphasized the importance of peer interaction in their development, their descriptions of the actual interactions in which they took part were modest in scope, and observed instances of such interactions during the year under study were not frequent. Like many other opportunities for professional development, peer interaction in the setting was low, constrained by such organizational arrangements as time and the physical layout of classrooms, and by norms supporting self-sufficiency, privacy, and non-interference. However, peer interaction that did occur, including imitation, exchanges concerning role expectations, background information on students, and advice on particular problems, did constitute a source of informal interaction that is not often highlighted in the literature. Furthermore, findings from a "natural experiment" in the case, occasioned by a change in administrative support for teacher development between the year under study and the previous year, suggest that enhanced opportunities for peer interaction are possible and effective within conventional school settings.

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This paper explores an apparent puzzle that continually surfaces in the literature on teacher development: In self-report data (such as Burden, 1979; Holly, 1977), teachers consistently state that their colleagues are a key influence on their professional growth, yet accounts of the nature of collegial interchange in teaching (Bussis, Chittenden, & Amarel, 1976; Feiman Nemser, 1983; Goodlad, 1984; Huberman, 1980; Lieberman & Miller, 1979; Lortie, 1975) portray this interchange as fragmentary and insubstantial, constrained by the organizational arrangements of schools as workplaces and by norms governing the exchange of information.

Several possible explanations for the disjuncture between reports emerge: Teachers tend to overestimate the importance that peer interaction has on their professional development; the ascribed importance of peer interaction to development is high only in a relative sense, since generally only a low level of teacher development activity is present in schools; or the literature on organizational and normative constraints does not describe informal mechanisms that teachers create to overcome such constraints.

METHODS

My exploration of the role of peer interaction in the ongoing development of practicing teachers was part of a broader

case study of conditions influencing teacher development in the work setting (Chism, 1984). My intent in employing a case study strategy was to build rapport with a staff of teachers over an extended period of time, affording the opportunity to engage in prolonged dialogue with the teachers about the opportunities for development that they encountered in their workplace. Since existing self-report and observational data often appeared contradictory, it was especially important to me that I choose methodology that would allow me to juxtapose teacher comments with my own observations of day-to-day influences on their professional development in the work setting and to explore the statements in light of the context and teachers' understandings. I was present in the elementary school chosen for the study for one or two days each week over the course of an entire school year. I became an accepted presence in classrooms, halls, and in the teachers' lounge, where I observed, interviewed, and interacted with sixteen teachers on the staff.

Since I was interested in studying the ordinary circumstances under which many teachers work, I chose as a site for my study an elementary school that had no special reputation, either positive or negative, for staff development or collegiality. Data collection was accomplished through observation, interviewing, and document analysis. Data were recorded in field notes and on audiotape. The study was divided into three phases: Orientation, devoted to the collection of

information on the context; Personal Development Histories, devoted to depth interviewing on teachers' perceptions of their past and present development and to observation of developmental activity in the school setting; and Perspective, devoted to triangulation, member checks, and interviews with teachers in other school settings as a means of enhancing the trustworthiness of the data and estimating its transferability (Guba, 1981). Data were ordered into sets of displays organized under flexible preliminary category headings with the aid of a microcomputer. Data analysis methods used are described by Tesch (1980) in her treatment of conceptual analysis, with eight headings from the main conceptual framework serving as preliminary organizers.

The site of the study, a school that I refer to as Riverside Elementary, is located in a large, desegregated urban system. The school's enrollment of nearly five hundred students is predominantly Appalachian and black. The school is organized traditionally into self-contained classrooms arranged along corridors within an older three-story stone building. The school routine at Riverside is not unlike that of other elementary schools across the country. It moves to the rhythms of the seasons, holidays, and vacations, to the bells that signal the beginning of the day, lunch, afternoon recess, and dismissal. Textbooks, dittos, group instruction, and recitation dominate classrom activity.

The teaching staff is experienced. More than half have over eleven years of experience, with the average experience being over fifteen years and spanning a range of five to thirty years. Only one teacher has been at Riverside for her entire thirty-year career. Others have come over the years, some in groups associated with desegregation or the closing of another school. Over three-quarters of the staff have been at Riverside for six years or less. Staff relations are easygoing. Both the testimony of the teachers and my own observations indicate that there are no strong cliques or sustained animosities.

Riverside's principal is a twenty-seven year veteran of the school system, having been principal for twenty of those years at various schools in the district. Five of those years have been spent at Riverside. He is a low-visability figure, preferring to attend to the details of administering the building and delegating instructional matters to the teachers. I came to describe his leadership style as "laissez-faire." In Hall et al's (1984) category system, he would be described as a responder.

FINDINGS

Like other teachers in self-report studies, the teachers at Riverside say that one of their greatest sources of professional growth is interaction with colleagues. The following discussion

of observed and reported interaction is organized into three sections: types of interaction, opportunities for interaction, and norms surrounding interaction.

Types of Interaction at Riverside

When their comments and my observations on the subject of interaction are assembled, the types of teacher interaction that occur at Riverside can be described by several category headings: providing psychological support, exchanging favors and materials, checking out expectations, imitating colleague behavior, exchanging background information, and trading advice and ideas.

Psychological Support

Informal conversations among the Riverside teachers are very aptly described by the categories "jousting" and "griping" developed by Lieberman and Miller (1979). Serious talk about teaching is cut short and complaints about students and their families characterize much of the talk that takes place. The complaining seems to be used by the teachers as a medium for release and for obtaining sympathy and support.

The teachers point out that they often function as "listening posts" for one another and thus perform a therapeutic function:

> One day this one teacher came walking in here and started telling me her whole life story. We sat in here for half an hour. Then she said goodbye. I didn't say two words but I guess whatever it was, she felt better. I'm just a good listening post. Most teachers do that for each other.

In the teachers' lounge and in informal conversations, the use of peer interaction as a source of psychological support is pervasive. While this type of peer interaction is not in itself a direct form of exchange about practice, its indirect influence in providing the psychological support necessary for growth appears to be substantial.

Exchanging Favors and Materials

In addition to serving as a means of psychological support, peer interaction at Riverside is often initiated for the purpose of easing the stress of group instruction. Teachers routinely plan to help each other out with fieldtrips, trade particular students for academic or disciplinary reasons, or borrow equipment or supplies. Such interactions occur frequently and illustrate the high degree of staff cooperation at Riverside.

Sharing materials, especially dittos, is also a standard form of interaction. Although one teacher maintains that teachers at some schools are very protective of their dittos, she says that this is not the case at Riverside, where sharing is very free. Teachers habitually ask around if they are looking for a certain kind of worksheet, and some teachers are known for their organized stocks of resources. Occasionally, when a teacher shows a ditto that she thinks is particularly effective or novel, she is met with spontaneous requests for copies.

The overall impact of such exchanges on the professional growth of the Riverside teachers appears to be minimal, however. While sharing favors and materials is highly important to the teachers in building group spirit and in easing their work, these exchanges are rarely accompanied by any sustained dialogue on instructional techniques or content knowledge. Although the indirect effect of such exchanges may be a broadening of a given teacher's knowledge, these common forms of interaction are viewed by the teachers not as major sources of learning, but as conveniences.

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Checking Out

A very popular form of interaction that occurs at Riverside is "checking out," which one teacher described as the "How far are you in reading-type thing." The teachers at Riverside use this form of interaction to pace their instruction, to gauge their progress and that of their students, and to standardize their grading practices. While "checking out" does not in itself lead to professional learning, it often determines the direction that teachers will pursue by indicating what the expectations are.

"Checking out" is reported as a common practice of teachers in new situations particularly, when they are intent on discovering the boundaries of the subject matter they are supposed to cover and the behavior they are expected to exhibit. The teachers at Riverside speak of using this form of interaction when they experience a change in grade level:

> When I came here without primary experience, I went and asked . . . the most experienced teacher on this grade level . . . what is expected of these children in regard to spelling. I didn't know that. I wasn't aware that they are required to start cursive writing at mid-year until I talked with [another teacher]. Nowhere had that been made obvious to me. . . . If I hadn't talked with another teacher to learn that, I probably

> would not have known. I also had to ask about this math mastery program.
>
> When I first came here, I told [another teacher] up in the copying room that I hadn't taught this grade, and I asked her how long she'd been teaching it. And I said, "Would you mind if I asked you some questions?" . . . I can go and ask her anything. "What are you doing?" "How did you do that?" And she'll show me how it's done in [that grade].

Other teachers talk about wanting to know, as new teachers or as teachers new to a certain grade, the course of study, the rules and procedures of the school for the children at that grade level, and such particular things as the kind of handwriting paper to be used by that grade level. Their most frequent source for this information is an experienced teacher at that grade level, who thus acts as the link for socializing new teachers into the traditions of a grade level or school.

As Feiman Nemser (1984) has pointed out, such instances of peer interaction can have positive as well as negative consequences. On the one hand, they can help teachers to gain a feel for organizing and pacing instruction, but on the other hand, they can lock teachers into a traditional way of operating. At Riverside, "checking out" is fairly common and its

effects are often long-term. In tracing such practices as use of teachers' manuals, classroom seating arrangements, and organization of reading groups, I often found that the teachers said that they made an attempt in their early days of teaching to model their actions on those of their more experienced peers.

Parallel Play

A form of collegial imitation that is related to "checking out" but occurs on a more continual basis is a phenomenon that is akin to the parallel play of toddlers. Without direct interchange, the teachers at Riverside continually imitate each others' practice. Ideas for art projects are copied from the bulletin board displays of other teachers, practices like sustained silent reading are brought from another building by one teacher and imitated by others. Practices such as having each child bring a box of tissues at the beginning of the year are standard, as is the idea of having children space out their sentences by holding fingers down between words as they write. The imitation is spontaneous and contagious. Teachers are often hard-pressed to name the colleagues who first gave them the ideas that they have obtained

in this fashion. Technically, these instances are not forms of interaction, since they do not involve overt exchanges, yet they are subtle and powerful instances of learning from peers. In several cases, teachers whose ideas had spread through the building were often unaware that their practices had been adopted by others.

The influence of imitation on the professional practice of the teachers at Riverside is substantial. In tracing the sources of selected teaching practices with me, teachers frequently concluded that these practices were often derived through imitation of their colleagues or former teachers, often unconsciously. While the influence of peers in such instances is not overt, it is clearly a major source of learning for many teachers that transcends the organizational time and space constraints that impede direct exchange.

Clues from the Past

A more direct form of peer interaction at Riverside is devoted to the search for background information about particular students. Teachers frequently interact to obtain from each other details about a student's family, work habits, or abilities. Often, a history of how the previous teacher worked

with the student is sought:

> If a child has some kind of problem or something, then I would ask the teacher who had him last year what seemed to be the problem . . . what did she do about it?
>
> I can get feedback on students from other teachers . . . find out what she did that maybe worked that I'm not doing with the child. Or I'll talk with the first-grade teachers a lot and I'll find out how the child was for them and what worked for them, and then I might try the same thing.

In addition to verbal interactions, teachers consult student records for past notations from the previous teachers that might help them to devise a course of action.

Exchanges about particular students constitute a large part of teaching-related talk in the teachers' lounge at Riverside. My analysis of many of these exchanges suggests that most reflect the teachers' interest and curiosity about people rather than a specific pedagogical intent. While the information that teachers obtain about particular students in this way may help them to address the needs of specific learners, the long-term developmental impact of this form of interaction does not appear to be great since exchanges rarely move beyond specific cases.

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Particular Problems

Interaction on the level of general advice and ideas for instruction is also characterized as being very particular. One teacher says, "I don't talk with teachers about shop on an ongoing day-to-day basis, but I do ask about particular instances." Another says, "Many [teachers] really don't seem to like to talk about 'techniques.' Technique is assumed. Teachers don't mind talking about particular problems though." Among the particular problems that the Riverside teachers discussed in the lounge and in the halls were teaching odd and even numbers, map work, and addition. One teacher gives an example: "If I get stuck with a child or a concept that I'm trying to get across, I can go to [a teacher] and say, 'Hey, this is what I did. Do you have another approach to doing that?'"

Although discussion of particular problems is highly valued by Riverside teachers, both observation and interview data indicate that it does not take place frequently. Such discussions are rarely noted in field notes of interactions in the halls or in the teachers' lounge, which were routinely recorded. When asked to recall specific instances of such discussions, many teachers could not. Although they at first would

estimate that such discussions took place "all the time," they would revise this global perception on reflection to "once a month or less often." Some teachers could not recall a single instance of having initiated or been involved in a discussion of a particular learning problem during the entire year.

When they occur, however, discussions of particular teaching techniques and ideas seem to be significant opportunities for teacher learning. Whether these discussions involve craft exchanges, obtaining outside perspectives on a particular problem, or more general theoretical ideas, they are instances of peer interaction that offer important direct learning opportunities.

In summary, the types of peer interaction at Riverside--sharing favors and materials, "checking out," parallel play, exchanging background information, and discussing particular problems--confirm the portrait in the literature of limited professional interchange while at the same time confirming teachers' reports that peer interaction plays a key role in their professional growth. The pervasive impact of such unspoken and unheralded influences as peer modelling and socialization, in particular, offers an explanation for why teachers feel that they learn from their peers

even though they find it difficult to pinpoint instances of peer interaction on professional matters.

Opportunities for Interaction

Given the fact that at Riverside, as in most other elementary schools, teachers are engaged with students in rooms isolated from one another, opportunities for interaction are quite limited. Some teachers extend these opportunities by talking on the telephone or meeting over the weekends, but this is not common. In a few cases, carpools to and from work have provided some additional time. For the most part, however, the teachers say that their opportunities to talk are rather infrequent and usually take the form of snatches of conversation in the hall or quick interchanges in the lounge.

In several of their comments, the teachers are clear in establishing that only a minimal amount of serious talk is allowed: "These kids drain you so much that we don't really want to talk shop." Lunch conversations are light and usually devoted to talk of families and news events. Talk about teaching is minimal. One teacher says, "A lot of the time you need a break from talking about that stuff."

The casual and rushed nature of peer interaction provides a partial explanation for why it is often so problem-driven. Scheduled times for interchange on a more general basis are not available. During the year under study, there were very few formal opportunities for peer interaction at Riverside. At no time during the entire school year did the staff meet to discuss common aims or to set schoolwide goals. Nor were there any regular meetings at which staff members teaching at the same grade level met to coordinate or to plan or to explore ideas and problems together. Staff meetings were usually quick after-school affairs devoted primarily to the business aspects of school life--fundraising, benefits, bell schedules. The few days available on the school calendar for building-level staff development were used by teachers to work individually in their classrooms.

At district-level inservice workshops, teachers were given instructions on how to use the new reading series and mastery program. Although the teachers were permitted to voice their concerns, the inservice formats cast the teachers in a passive role. A few teachers taking university courses, a teacher taking a Teacher Expectations and Student Achievement workshop, and two teachers asked to serve on an advisory group on

standardized testing reported that significant opportunities for peer interaction occurred through these vehicles. These were somewhat isolated instances, however, and the picture that emerges is one of few formal opportunities for peer interaction built into the school schedule.

With the exception of the teacher who participates in the Teacher Expectations and Student Achievement program, teachers do not have opportunities to visit the classrooms of other teachers. One teacher says that she occasionally uses personal days to do so.

Norms Surrounding Interaction

Although the Riverside teachers display different habits and sentiments with respect to interaction, certain general norms can be described. These center on self-sufficiency, privacy, and reticence.

Self-sufficiency: Knowing It All

Many teachers at Riverside say that early on in their teaching careers they felt uneasy about asking their fellow teachers for help:

> I think the feeling is that if you go and ask for help--none of us, I think, a lot of times want to admit

> we can't do what we were supposed to do--but when you are given a classroom the assumption is made right away that you know what you are doing.
>
> When I started teaching, I felt like I'm supposed to know all this because I've been through all this work at the university. Then you come out thinking you are supposed to know what to do.
>
> I think there was a time when I felt like I was supposed to know it all, probably in the first year I was teaching. The first couple of years, I felt that way.

The feeling that they were supposed to "know it all" was in many cases buttressed over the years by the belief that others were overburdened, and that a "strong" teacher takes care of her own classroom business without help. In several cases, the norm of self-sufficiency was reinforced by a supervising teacher or by the first principal: "I think [my supervising teacher] explained to me very early that the principal did not want to be bothered with the housekeeping type of problems that you might have in a classroom. You should handle it yourself, and I did." Other teachers arrived at a similar position over the years.

The tendency to turn inward rather than outward during times of uncertainty or stress seems to persist.

One teacher describes her initial reluctance to interact in terms of self-confidence: "I think I needed to feel a little bit better about what I was doing before I felt like I could go to others." Another speaks of having the same feeling when she was transferred to another school.

The introduction of a new reading series prompted similar reactions, with many teachers suspending cross-groupings or cooperative work until they worked the series through once by themselves. In many cases, teachers claim that they turn not to colleagues but to written materials, such as curriculum guides or the manuals of commercial materials, for the learning that they feel they need. The teachers indicate that they use these sources as a private, non-threatening way to learn.

One teacher, who was quite distressed to realize that the university had not prepared her to teach reading, felt uncomfortable admitting her ignorance to her colleagues and solved her problem by working exclusively from the teacher's manual of the adopted reading series during her first year of teaching. She says that although her style of teaching reading continues to develop, it is very much based on the ways of organizing instruction that she learned from the

manual in isolation.

Privacy and Possessiveness: Nobody Had Better Mess

An additional norm governing the types of interactions that can contribute to teacher learning is the respect for privacy. School rooms at Riverside as in many other schools are not treated as common property, but as the personal domains of particular teachers. Permission to enter is sought formally; alterations or intrusions made by others are resented. One teacher describes the feeling:

> I think basically teachers are left alone. . . . You have domain of your territory. It's kind of like "This is my territory" and you stake it out. You think, "This is mine." It's kind of like your house. I was thinking about this the other day. You walk in and this is home when you are there. Nobody had better mess. You don't want somebody coming in and destroying anything. But it almost becomes that way. My territory. I think teachers are left alone. I really do.

Similarly, many teachers speak of the reluctance that some of their colleagues express about having another adult such as an aide or a student teacher in their classrooms.

For many teachers at Riverside, there is a self-imposed isolation. Nearly half of the teachers at Riverside choose to spend almost all of their time, including lunches and recesses, in their own classrooms. Even those who frequent the lounge, however, attest that they are very unfamiliar with what happens in other classrooms. One says:

> You are in an isolated area. I don't know what that floor is doing. I don't even know what my own floor is doing. I have no idea of what anybody is doing. . . . If you are in an office with a whole group of people, you know what those people are doing during the day. In this kind of situation, we don't see it.

Although teachers express global awareness of what others are doing--usually an estimation of the class control of other teachers--they profess to know little about the actual routines and content of instruction. For example, several were surprised to learn that their colleague scheduled reading for the afternoons instead of the mornings, yet the practice had been in effect since the beginning of the school year. One teacher, who was shocked after visiting an open classroom at her child's school, said, "I used to think all teachers taught alike until I saw that." One result of the respect for privacy, then, is that communications are

cut off and therefore knowledge of options for classroom learning is not expanded.

Reticence: Fear of Bossing

By far, the most prevalent caution that the teachers at Riverside mention with respect to learning through interaction is the fear of "bossiness." All attest to the belief that the person who wants information or help should initiate the interaction. Various teachers express a concern with avoiding "infringing," "imposing" or being "pushy" or "boorish." They say that the risk of appearing superior keeps them from offering unsolicited advice or ideas. Several recount instances when they recall a breach of this norm in their own experience. The resentment that they express centers on status. For example, one teacher said, "When I went to [another school], she [another teacher] came into the room and started giving me all this advice. It was a real turn off for me. I had been teaching for longer than her and she came in and told me what to do."

While several teachers expressed the feeling that "This building is better for accepting advice than a lot of buildings would be," they said that the norm is characteristic of all settings of which they are aware:

> I find this about teachers--I don't care where they are at--I find that they love to share things with other teachers when asked, but most of them won't butt in. . . . Not only in this building, but in every other building.

Although a few teachers will entertain the idea of offering help or information if they think there is little danger of offense, most feel that such offers should come from people with formal authority:

> I guess I feel it's not my place to go and give advice to others. I think that if it needs to be done, and if someone needs help, then maybe one of these specialists like the reading resource teacher should go in. . . . I don't want another teacher telling me how to teach.

Lateral interaction for learning is thus impeded.

DISCUSSION

The findings on the nature of peer interaction on teacher development in the school setting partially support each of the three hypothetical explanations offered at the outset of the paper. Although teachers universally emphasized the importance of peer interaction in their development, their descriptions of actual interactions in which they took part were modest in scope, and observed instances of such substantial

professional interactions during the year under study were not frequent. Like many other opportunities for professional development, peer interaction in the setting was low, constrained by such organizational arrangements as time and the physical layout of classrooms, and by norms supporting self-sufficiency, privacy, and non-interference. However, instances of peer interaction that occurred, including exchanges concerning role expectations, background information on students, and advice on particular problems, did constitute a source of informal interaction that is not often highlighted in the literature.

The question of whether peer interaction in traditional school settings is as routinely limited by structural and normative conditions as it is at Riverside requires some further discussion. During the Perspective phase of my study, I found that different schools varied somewhat in the extent of peer interaction that occurred on professional matters. Two out of the ten schools that I visited during this phase displayed environments characterized by what Little (1981) refers to as a "norm of collegiality." Talk in the lounge was more frequently related to questions of learning; teachers found time in the schedule and on their own for frequent meetings on imstructional

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improvement. In the other eight schools, however, the pattern resembled the one at Riverside, with the exceptions that staff relations were more political and divided at some schools than at Riverside, and formal scheduled opportunities for interaction were more frequent at other schools than at Riverside.

Interesting additional insights into the potential impact of peer interaction on staff development also came through a sort of "natural experiment" in the case of Riverside. Very early in the study, references began to surface about the contrast between the opportunities for interaction during the year under study and during the previous year. As the study progressed, a considerable body of testimony accrued about the previous year, prompting me to explore the contrast through retrospective interviews and through observation and interviewing of the person who, by all accounts, was central to the difference, the principal of another elementary who had spent the previous year at Riverside as a cadet (intern) principal.

Although the teachers attributed many improvements to the cadet, they emphasized the learning that they felt they gained from grade level meetings that she coordinated. Analysis of their descriptions of the meetings showed that in general:

--The meetings were devoted to concrete instructional matters (although occasionally discussion of a specific issue led to an interest in a more general or more abstract idea).

--The cadet acted as coordinator and facilitator, but encouraged the teachers to lead and control the discussion.

--The meetings were held regularly and the after-school time slot was not resented. One teacher remarked, "It wasn't at all like usual where all you were wishing is that you could go home."

--The teachers were often asked to prepare by bringing information or ideas on a certain issue.

--The meetings resulted in some specific steps for action and follow-up.

--The teachers looked forward to the meetings and felt renewed and enriched by the interchange.

--Spillover from the meetings often dominated lounge conversation for days.

This past opportunity for regular, focused peer interaction based on collegiality and active involvement was praised by every teacher without prompting during the course of the study, testifying to the impact of such peer interaction.

The crucial difference between the two years that emerges is leadership. Despite the favorable response of the teachers to the past year's meetings, they took no initiative during the year under study to call similar meetings. Even though they spoke wistfully of the continuing need for these interchanges, the meetings stopped when the cadet left. This suggests that professionally productive peer interaction does not just happen by itself, but depends on the availability of leadership that can help to offset the organizational and normative barriers that often constrain such interaction. Under such favorable conditions, it appears that peer interaction can present powerful opportunities for teacher growth.

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